

# Context Independence and Context Dependence of the Factuality Verb Function In English and Malay Texts

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## Introduction

As we all know, Malay and English are the two most important languages used in Malaysia. Both are seen as equally important simply because they are extensively used by Malaysians in their daily life; in formal and informal settings. Due to the extensive and frequent use of the languages, it is essential for the users to be fully conversant in both languages to ensure that messages are precisely conveyed with less or no communication breakdown occurs. Much has been said about the differences between English and Malay particularly in terms of the structures and that such difference may have contributed to the inability of the languages users particularly the L2 learners to use the target language effectively (Jalaluddin, Mat Awal & Abu Bakar, 2008). Other similar works have supported this claim (Govindasamy, 1994; Maros, Tan & Salehuddin, 2007; Mohd Ali, 1991). Many other studies claimed that students at secondary and tertiary levels still found it hard to master both languages. This has become a growing concern as it might cause communication breakdowns among the language users or might contribute to the inability to convey messages precisely. It is time for more attention to be given on the nature of the language systems or the languages respectively. It was found that learners have difficulty using appropriate verb inflections and modal auxiliaries to convey factuality messages. Perhaps, learners need to be led to notice the differences that exist between the nature of the factual and hypothetical events. Factual events refer to events that truly happen either in the non-past context or past context. Learners may be able to use the verb inflections and modal auxiliaries more appropriately when they are then led to notice the grammatical features i.e. inflections and modal auxiliaries, used to convey these factuality messages. It may also be useful for the language users to know if there are cases in which they may just have to rely on context to communicate the factuality messages (due to the absence of the grammatical features to convey the information). When certain grammatical features (inflections and auxiliaries) are combined with verbs, it helps language users to know how linguistically true an event is; how close an event is to reality or how remote it is from reality.

Examples:

- (1) Research in L2 discourse *suggests* that learners of English at every level of proficiency encounter problems in applying tone choice. (EA18)
- (2) He argues that these disagreements helped interlocutors construct coherent mutual understandings and that disagreements as well as perspective sharing *should be regarded* as part of activity progression. (EA9)

In EA18, the grammatical feature, inflection –s attached to the verb (*suggest+s*) indicates that the event is 100% true, linguistically. It can be said that the use of the inflections –s (attached to the verb) helps language users to know that the event ‘*suggest*’ is highly factual. In Example (2), the modal auxiliary ‘*should*’ shows that the event has some level of likeliness to occur. Therefore, the event ‘*should be regarded*’ is seen as hypothetical in nature.

This study is meant to discover if the Factuality verb function (i.e. how likely the event is to be) is supported by grammatical features; to see if the language users could just rely on

the grammatical features alone to communicate Factuality information and if they also need to rely on context to communicate the needed information.

There are three objectives of this study:

- (1) To find out if the verb function Factuality is supported by grammatical signs in English and Malay.
- (2) To examine if the two languages are contextually independent or contextually dependent in terms of Factuality.

The two guiding research questions are:

- (1) To what extent is the verb function Factuality supported by grammatical signs in English and Malay?
- (2) Are the Factuality messages in English more contextually-independent than they are in Malay?
- (3) Are the Factuality messages in English more contextually-dependent than they are in Malay?

## Methodology

To achieve the objectives of this study, which is exploratory and descriptive in nature, a mixed methods approach was adopted. A mixed methods approach is known as an approach that allows researchers to combine some elements from the qualitative with that of the quantitative approach (Hepner & Hepner, 2004; Neuman, 2006; Dornyei, 2007). Some preliminary work was conducted in order to explore the English and Malay verb systems; analyses were done to discover the grammatical features that convey Factuality messages in English and Malay and how much context is needed in cases where there is no grammatical features found to communicate Factuality messages. The results obtained at this phase were qualitatively-derived. The researcher also intended to make comparisons between the two languages in the deployment of the grammatical features that exist that convey Factuality messages and the amount of context needed in cases where no grammatical features to convey Factuality messages. Therefore, quantitative approach was adopted at this phase.

The aim of the study was to explore the extent to which two languages (English and Malay) can rely on grammatical features to convey Factuality messages. Therefore, actual data were sourced from academic and journalistic articles. For English, data were collected from the *TESOL Quarterly* and *The Economist*; whereas, the *Asia Pacific Journal of Educators and Education* (formerly known as *Jurnal Pendidik dan Pendidikan*) and *Dewan Masyarakat* contributed to the Malay corpus. For this study, 60 English texts and 60 Malay texts were analysed. The distributions of the contextually independent and contextually dependent verb features in both languages were examined. Inferential statistics was used to determine if statistically significant difference exists between the two languages in the use of the contextually independent and contextually dependent verb features.

## Results

The first research question explores the extent to which the verb function linguistic trueness/Factuality is supported by grammatical signs in English and Malay. It was found that there are grammatical features to convey Factuality messages in English and Malay. The inflections the inflections –s, -ed, -Ø (in English) and auxiliaries *do, will, would, should, must, can, could, may, might* (in English), *telah, sudah, pernah, sedang, masih* (in Malay) are the grammatical features that can be deployed to communicate Factuality messages. These

grammatical features have been categorised into four categories under the Factuality verb system; Emphatic-Do, High Factuality, High Hypotheticality and Low Hypotheticality. The categorisation can be seen in the table below:

Table 1.0: Classification of Factuality verb features

	FACTUALITY			
	HIGH FACTUALITY		LOW FACTUALITY	
	Emphatic-Do/-lah	High Factuality	High Hypotheticality	Low Hypotheticality
ENGLISH	<i>do+V</i>	<i>-s, -ed, -Ø</i>	<i>will, would, shall, should, must,</i>	<i>can, could, may, might</i>
MALAY	<i>-lah</i>	<i>telah, sudah, pernah, sedang, masih</i>	<i>akan, mesti, harus, perlu</i>	<i>can, could, may might</i>

Figure 1.0: Distribution of Grammatical Factuality verb features in English and Malay

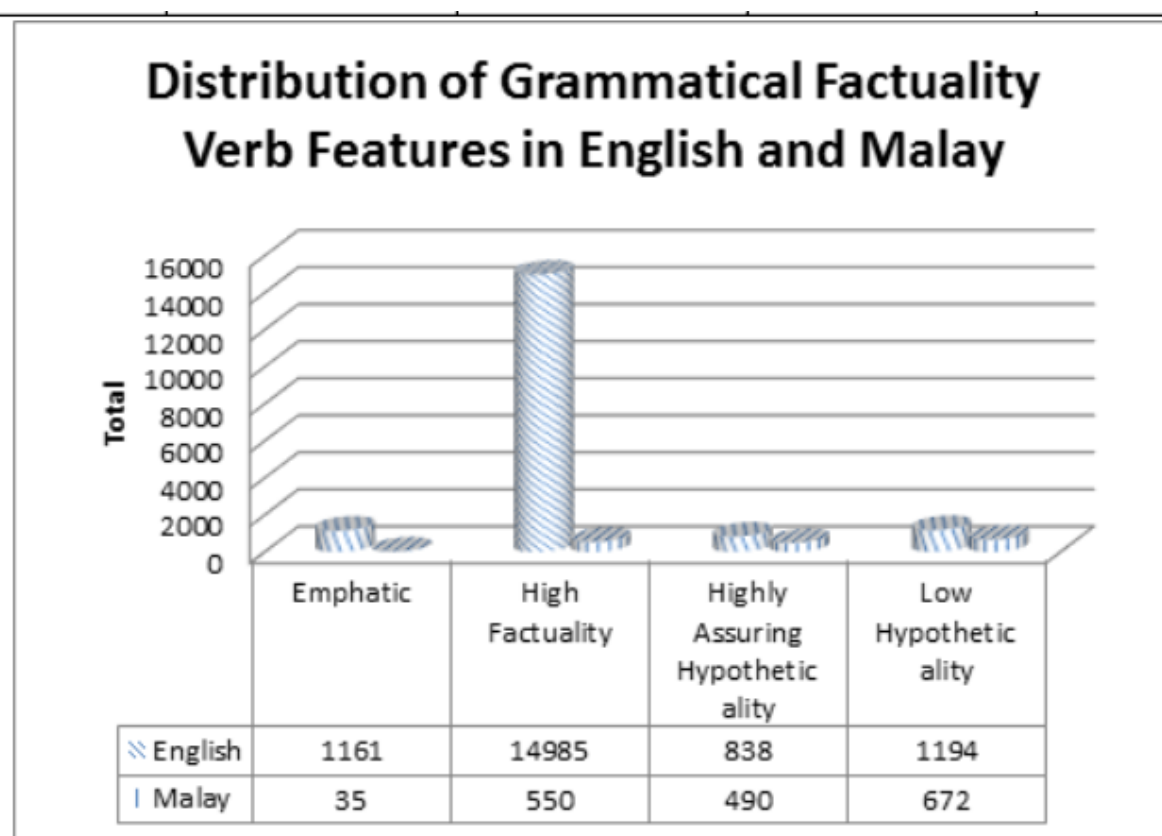


Figure 1.0 shows the distribution of the factuality verb features in English and Malay texts according to classification. It was discovered that the use of the Emphatic feature in English (n=1161) was higher than in Malay (n=35). Similarly, there was a greater use of the High Factuality verb features in English (n=14985) than in Malay texts (n=550). For the third member of the Factuality system, it was discovered that the use of the High Hypotheticality

verb features was relatively low in both languages. However, it can be noticed that the verb features were more widely used in English than in Malay. It was also found that the use the Low Hypotheticality verb features. Thus, it seems to show that English relies on grammatical features to convey Factuality messages more compared to Malay.

In order to find out if English is more contextually-independent than Malay, contextual-independency and contextual-dependency were examined in English and Malay texts. For cross-linguistic comparison, the converted scores (per 10, 000 words) were used. The results are shown in the table below:

Table 1.1: Distribution of the Context Independent and Context Dependent verb features in English and Malay (Factuality)

	Factuality			
	Context Independent (CI)		Context Dependent (CD)	
	English	Malay	English	Malay
Converted Score (per 1000 words)	38491.08	4300.07	14973.42	2031.2
Mean	641.5180	71.6678	249.5570	33.9305
t	17.153		20.773	
df	118		118	
Sig. (2-tailed)	0.000*		0.000*	

\*\*significant at 0.05 (\*\*p<0.5)

As shown in Table 1.1, there were more contextual independent verb features found in English texts (38491 per 10,000 words) than in Malay texts (4300 per 10, 000 words). Results from the independent samples t-test showed that the difference was statistically significant.

Similarly, it can be seen that there was a greater use of the context dependent verb features in English texts than in Malay texts. There was also a statistically significant difference in use of the context dependent verb features between the two languages.

## Discussion

From the analyses and the significance tests conducted, it was discovered that English and Malay rely much on the grammatical features (inflections and auxiliaries) to communicate Factuality messages. There are grammatical features found in both languages that convey Factuality messages. Grammatical features such as the inflections *-s*, *-ed*, *-Ø* (in English) and auxiliaries *do*, *will*, *would*, *should*, *must*, *can*, *could*, *may*, *might* (in English), *telah*, *sudah*, *pernah*, *sedang*, *masih* (in Malay) have been found to convey Factual messages.

When there are grammatical features that can be used to convey Factuality messages, it means that the messages are contextually-independent. In this case, language users do not have to rely on context to communicate the Factuality messages and the messages are known as contextually-independent.

Example:

The participants *were encouraged* to stop the tape whenever they *had* a question or *wanted* to comment on what *was happening* in the interaction (EA10). In EA10, *were* (V+zero inflection), *had* (V+ed), *wanted* (V+ed) and *was* (V+ed) serve as the grammatical features/Factuality markers to convey that all the events are Highly Factual. The results showed

that Factuality markers were deployed more in English than in Malay. Thus, it can be concluded that the Factuality verb function in English texts is supported by grammatical features more than it is in Malay texts.

In cases where there are no grammatical features to indicate Factuality messages, language users will have to rely on context to interpret the messages. The messages which are contextually-derived are known as contextually-dependent (CD). This is illustrated in the following example:

At one prestigious private school, a girl was wearing a burlap vest with the words “Shame Upon me” *written* on it.... (EA1). The verb *written* has no specific grammatical sign that would help language users to interpret Factuality message. Therefore, one has to find some contextual clues in order to know the linguistic trueness of the event. In this case, the verb phrase *was wearing* might be helpful in providing some contextual clues that all the events took place in the past. It was also found that there were more contextual dependent verb features in English texts more than in Malay texts. This shows that English writers rely on context more often than the Malay writers and that they still need to rely on context to communicate Factuality messages despite having grammatical features to convey the information.

## Conclusion

The analyses and tests conducted showed that the verb function Factuality is supported by grammatical features in English and partially in Malay. For English, there are grammatical features that can communicate the messages of all the four Factuality classes; Emphatic, High Factual, Highly Assuring Hypotheticality and Low Hypotheticality. Similarly, there are also grammatical features found in Malay texts that convey messages of all these four classes. However, it was noticed that the number of grammatical features found were fewer compared to English. The absence of grammatical features to communicate Past Perfect and Present Perfect messages in Malay texts contributes to the fewer grammatical signs used (compared to English) to convey Factuality messages.

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